



Savoy to Earlham Street plan and section

or service area behind the street. This belongs to the activities around it and confines them. The sections through the street and service yard are symmetrical while the section through the block between them is asymmetrical. So my proposition is that, traditionally, similar uses housed in a similar scale of building, faced each other across streets and the change of use and scale occurred within the block enabling a succession of adjacent streets to be different from one another. The symmetry in the street affirms its character as a place. It follows that the symmetry across the block characteristic of so much modern development produces either uniformity across the urban fabric as a whole or a series of places of ambiguous function and scale.

Disconcerted by the local borough planning policy for the Cheshire Street area, our office looked at how these ideas might be applied. We discovered that the existing section was intriguing, with the railway in a cutting going into Liverpool Street, bounded to the south by run-down warehousing looking into an existing plot of public open space called Allen's Gardens. We showed how the lively street character could be kept by preserving buildings and functions and how the hinterland could be developed for servicing warehousing without affecting the street scene.

We considered housing to be a more apt use to border the public open space which becomes the enclosed garden its name suggests. But we also perceived an economic side: that housing primes the site value, giving confidence to potential small scale investors in the little workshops and businesses between the housing and the railway. There is a sequence here, railway, small businesses giving acoustic protection to the housing, and the housing making an appropriate edge to the garden, to which it has a claim which small businesses don't. There's an idea here which is analogous to the game of dominoes where certain values attach to each other

and certain ones don't and it is this expression of congruity that is also part of my investigation of certain sections through the West End of London.

I would like to focus on two sections. The first is across London from the Thames to Centre Point. There is a general sense of congruity across the river with the Royal Festival Hall, the National Theatre, County Hall and so forth facing the Savoy Hotel, Shell Mex and Embankment Place on the north bank. All are equivalent kinds of set pieces. So there are symmetries of intention even across a river. All are responses to the symbolic status which the river carries into the city. For example the Savoy Hotel free-standing, with its palazzo section, is a type of Thames-side building that goes back to Roman times when villas were built here. If we look at what's happening sectionally on the north bank we find that on the slope from the Embankment itself up to the Strand we get an enormous change of scale, and a change of type through the section.

What happens is that the hotel changes from being a palazzo with all the other ones looking across the river to being a terraced structure which subsumes its rhetoric into that of the Strand and becomes equivalent to most of the other buildings lining the Strand – mostly stone or stucco-clad structures, five to seven storeys high. The Savoy Hotel itself is very interesting because there is a series of transformations within: it's actually rather like a Parisian Hôtel de Ville which invites you to get into the centre of the block where a lot of things are offered including the theatre. It gets its identity when entered from the Strand from its place of access. It has a special identity as a place rather than as an elevation to the street.

In this argument I am not concerned with architectural style, but with purpose and use, probably material to some extent, and with scale. I think many different architectural idioms are reconcilable with those conventions. Moving one street to the north, we find another character in Maiden Lane,